

**REGIONAL STUDIES ASSOCIATION RESEARCH NETWORK ON  
EMPLOYABILITY AND LABOUR MARKET POLICY IN  
EUROPEAN (AND INTERNATIONAL) PERSPECTIVE**

**BACKGROUND**

In 2006, the Regional Studies Association (RSA) founded a new Research Network on ‘Employability and Labour Market Policy in International Perspective’, hosted at the Employment Research Institute at Napier University, Edinburgh. The Network’s activities centred around two international seminars, which sought to build upon the success of a previous ‘Employability and Labour Market Policy’ seminar series (co-funded by the RSA) organised by Napier University, Warwick University, and Paisley University in 2003-4 (findings were published in a February 2005 special edition of *Urban Studies* journal and resulted in the Routledge book ‘Employability and Local Labour Market Policy’ in 2006<sup>1</sup>).

The overarching objective of the new Research Network was to develop a broader understanding of the spatial dimensions of the employability agenda, and implications for labour market policy in the nations of the EU and beyond. A first specific aim was to promote collaboration between economic geographers and regional economists interested in labour market issues that affect individuals’ employability, and social policy analysts researching strategies to improve employability and combat worklessness. A second aim was to encourage the sharing of ideas between UK and international researchers working on these issues. The Research Network succeeded on both counts. Three days of seminars brought together colleagues from a wide range of disciplines. The seminars’ 45 attendees were drawn from institutions in all four UK nations, along with colleagues from Australia, Belgium, Canada, Denmark, Italy and Spain.

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<sup>1</sup> McQuaid, RW, Green, AE, and Danson, M (2006) eds. *Employability and Local Labour Market Policy*, London: Routledge.

The first seminar (extended from one to two days due to demand) was held at the Employment Research Institute at Napier University in Edinburgh in October 2007, with the second event hosted by the Faculty of Political and Social Sciences, Universidad Complutense, Madrid in March 2008.

## **KEY ISSUES**

The first seminar in Edinburgh opened with a paper presented by **Martin Watts**, co-authored with colleagues at the **Centre of Full Employment and Equity in the University of Newcastle, Australia**. Perhaps appropriately, Watts et al's paper raised profound questions around the assumptions that underlie many employability and labour market policies in EU/OECD states. Their analysis highlighted the worsening spatial disparities in official unemployment and underemployment in OECD countries (with urban centres outstripping outlying regions in terms of employment growth, but persistent pockets of high and long-term unemployment even in growing city regions). A powerful critique of the supply-side logic exemplified in the 1994 OECD Jobs Study (and the resulting 'diminished aspiration of full employability') followed, leading to a call for demand-side interventions and government strategies to address spatial patterns of disadvantage in the 'rationing' of job opportunities.

Our Edinburgh seminar also allowed for the sharing of findings from two projects that fell under a recent Joseph Rowntree Foundation programme on 'Transforming the Prospects of Places'. First, **Tony Gore (CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University)** and **Emma Hollywood (Employment Research Institute, Napier University)** discussed the findings of research conducted by their institutes in partnership with Cardiff University on social networks and job seeking in coalfields areas. Drawing on in-depth interviews with job seekers residing in ex-mining areas near major cities, Gore and Hollywood pointed to considerable variation in the experiences of people in

different coalfields, but noted common themes around transport and other barriers to work. They also suggested that, while the strong social networks within coalfields communities could help people to cope with the experience of unemployment, the relatively tight-knit and localised nature of these networks limited some job seekers' ability to access information about opportunities in neighbouring urban centres. **David North, Stephen Syrett and David Etherington** from **Middlesex University's Centre for Enterprise and Economic Development Research** then presented key findings from their broader study of approaches to governance and policy in 'Tackling concentrated worklessness in deprived localities', identifying important weaknesses in national, regional and local policy on the integration of economic development, employability and social inclusion agendas.

**Alessandra De Lellis** from the **Institute for Workers Vocational Training Development, Rome**, focused on the regional dimension of active labour market policies in Italy, arguing that European Social Fund programmes offer the hope of developing a more effective local and regional dimension for the implantation of EES in that country – a form of 'regional disparities therapy'. But De Lillas pointed to inconsistent approaches to the allocation of resources, variable regional administrative capacity and weak monitoring systems as undermining progress towards more regionally responsive policies. **Milena Büchs** of the **University of Southampton** (presenting joint research with Mariely López-Santana of the European University Institute) also discussed regional and local governance issues in Italian labour market policy, this time in comparison with the UK and Germany. Their paper identified common themes in terms of the decentralisation of the employability agenda, but explained how these processes were defined and limited by welfare regime, political and administrative frameworks.

Even more localised changes in the governance and delivery of employability strategies were the concern of two papers focusing on the reform of public employment services in Belgium and

Denmark. **Line Van Hemel** (presenting work co-authored by Ludo Struyven) at the **Higher Institute of Labour Studies, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium** assessed the impact of the integration of local employment services in Flanders, concluding that the shift to a localised jobcentre model had produced some benefits in terms of co-operation but also fragmented and incomplete mix of primary and secondary services. **Colin Lindsay** at the **Employment Research Institute, Napier University** and **Mikkel Mailand, University of Copenhagen**, then presented a critical analysis of the shift from strong regional governance structures to a more localised, jobcentre-focused approach in Denmark. They saw benefits in joining up employability services for the insured and uninsured unemployed, but also raised concerns about variations in capacity at the local level and the exclusion of trade unions and employers from planning regional-level strategies.

**Karen Gilmore** and **Mike Danson (University of the West of Scotland)** were concerned with the more immediate contribution that employers could make to the employability agenda. Their paper focused on employer attitudes to the recruitment of disadvantaged job seekers. They found employers keen to refute allegations of bias against the long-term unemployed and disadvantaged, but that concerns about ‘work readiness’ (and a willingness to recruit from alternative sources such as migrant labour) were common.

The gendered nature of employability issues was a recurring theme in both seminars. **Kathryn Ray**, presenting a paper co-authored with colleagues at the **Policy Studies Institute**, used evidence from the evaluation of the UK government’s Employment, Retention and Advancement (ERA) pilot in North East England to discuss ‘Masculinity, manual work and employability’. Ray et al’s paper explored men’s personal narratives about work, and the ways that these interacted with the nature of local labour market opportunities in shaping their experiences of retention and advancement. It was noted that ‘decent jobs’ were often characterised as offering manual labour and job security, characteristics that are increasingly difficult to locate in local labour markets in the UK.

The barriers to work faced by disadvantaged women and other job seekers with childcare responsibilities formed the focus for a paper presented in Madrid by **Ron McQuaid** of the **Employment Research Institute, Napier University**. Drawing on evidence from the evaluation of the Scottish Government's Working For Families programme, McQuaid explained how this locally delivered initiative has sought to link childcare and employability provision. Examples of good practice were presented alongside evidence of the programme's impact in helping people towards work, but it was suggested that those with substantial family pressures or severe barriers to work had sometimes struggled to make progress.

The health and employability barriers faced by some women were of central interest to a paper presented during our Edinburgh seminar by **Christina Beatty, Steve Fothergill (CRESR, Sheffield Hallam University)** and **Donald Houston (University of Dundee)** co-authored with colleagues at both institutions. 'A gendered theory of employment, sickness and unemployment' set out a conceptual framework and evidence from UK labour markets to explore 'the paradoxical simultaneous rise of women's employment and receipt of incapacity benefits'. Mapping the take-up of such benefits, Beatty et al noted that women claiming incapacity benefits are overwhelmingly located alongside male claimants in areas where heavy industry has declined and argued that a number of other factors may have an impact, including: increased competition from men for occupations traditionally held by women; benefit claiming among women in order to shore-up household income in workless households; and the long-term health impacts of worklessness, poverty and family breakdown.

This important contribution introduced another key theme running across both seminars: the relationship between health, employability and the benefits system, and the appropriateness of current policy responses to Incapacity Benefit reform. **Anne Green** of the **Institute for**

**Employment Research, University of Warwick** and **Ian Shuttleworth, Queen's University Belfast**, reported the results of extensive survey work with Incapacity Benefit claimants in Northern Ireland, finding that a large proportion of IB claimants are far removed from the 'world of work' – in that they have not worked or searched for work for some and do not expect to work in the near future, if ever. This poses the question of how realistic it is to assume that the number of claimants can be reduced significantly – at least in the short-term.

In two papers, **Michael Anyadike-Danes** of the **Economic Research Institute of Northern Ireland** first highlighted the considerable regional variation in Incapacity Benefit claiming in the UK, arguing for a 'North-South' divide (reflecting patterns of job loss in post-industrial labour markets), before considering the appropriateness of the government's Pathways to Work programme as a response. Anyadike-Danes concluded that the evidence on impacts achieved by Pathways to Work remains mixed at best. **Colin Lindsay** at the **Employment Research Institute, Napier University** took a more positive view of the potential for the Pathways to Work agenda to make a difference to people excluded from the labour market due to health problems. Reporting early outcomes from research with health practitioners involved in the delivery of 'Pathways', Lindsay highlighted the potential benefits associated with recruiting nursing and other NHS professionals to deliver health-related employability services, but raised concerns regarding the government's commitment to outsource future 'condition management' services to non-public sector actors.

The progression routes of higher skilled migrants in the Canadian economy was the focus for **Melina Young** (an independent researcher based in Toronto, Canada). Young's research discussed the potential for knowledge spillover effects flowing from the integration of skilled migrants, and highlighted the work of specialist labour market intermediaries at the region level brokering people into appropriate jobs and careers.

The final session of our Madrid seminar returned to some of the major themes informing both Research Network events. **María Paz Martín**, representing our host institution, **Universidad Complutense, Madrid**, presented a discussion of the social construction of employability at local level. Her contribution analysed the place of the ‘renewed version of employability’ – in terms of the focus on activation and personal responsibility within the increasingly dominant ‘flexicurity’ discourse – within individuals’ understandings of their roles in the labour market. **David Etherington** from **Middlesex University** and **Martin Jones** of the **Institute of Geography and Earth Sciences, Aberystwyth University** presented on ‘World class skills? Governance geographies and the delivery of lifelong learning’ – a critique of the assumptions underlying EU institutions’ and many member states’ lifelong learning and skills policies (and especially the reliance on market mechanisms in skills provision). Drawing on a comparative analysis of the UK and Denmark, they discussed some of the tensions that prevail in different EU models and pointed to the multi-layered, spatialised processes affecting the restructuring of state provision of skills, a form of multi-level governance encouraged at EU level through the Open Method of Coordination.

## **CONCLUSIONS AND OUTCOMES**

The RSA Research Network on ‘Employability and Labour Market Policy in International Perspective’ brought together researchers from a wide range of countries and disciplines. Its discussions covered fundamental issues of supply and demand in labour market policy; relationships between different forms of governance in economic development and employability; the spatial aspects of labour market disadvantage; issues and policies in addressing health-related barriers to work; and how the concept of employability itself is understood by policy makers and job seekers – a varied agenda, but one addressing key issues of interest to those researching and seeking to inform policies on addressing labour market exclusion.

A number of papers presented Research Network seminars have been submitted as part of a Special Edition proposal for the journal *Environment and Planning C: Government and Policy*. Many Network participants also contributed papers to a similarly themed Gateway on 'Employability and Labour Market Policy' at the RSA Conference 2008 in Prague.

Members of the Research Network are considering how best to take forward its work, with discussion centring on a further event and publication on policy issues around Incapacity Benefit reform. It is clear that the Network has been able to establish new links across disciplines, institutions and borders – we hope to continue to share ideas and practice in this important area of research and policy.

## **CONTACT**

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